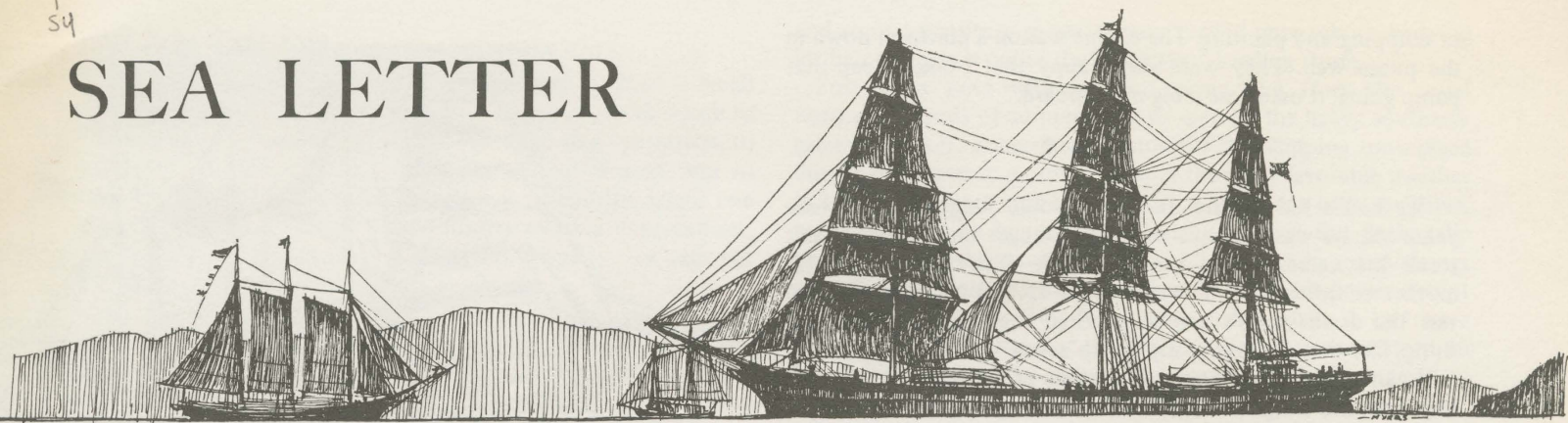


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SEA LETTER



FROM THE SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME MUSEUM /

August 1972

Some Soundings on Tape:

Here are the "liner notes," as they say in the record industry, for a tape we made last fall with Mr. Otto Graf, of Wheatland, California. Mr. Graf arrived off San Diego in the 2,200 ton full-rigged ship *Peru* of Bremen (500 tons larger than *Balclutha*) in 1909. Disdaining a tugboat, the captain sailed her into the harbor, past Point Loma, past Ballast Point, and to an anchorage as if these were the days of Dana and his command was a 200 ton brig.

"Arriving in San Diego, 1909. Sailing into bay. To anchorage under sail. Deck in fo'c's'le sanded down, same as deck outside, table scrubbed, not a speck of dust anyplace, admired by throngs of visiting San Diegans, bunk curtains, etc. Visitors marvelled at fancy knotwork. Otto visits Turnverein on Sunday.

"Good description of running away from ship, getting train to San Pedro, transferring from Danish seaman's union to S.U.P., shipping 3 years in coastal schooners. Down and out in Portland, Oregon. Works way down coast on steam schooner. Looks up Uncle Hans, mate on the *Governor*. Uncle gets him a job as quarter-master on *Umatilla*, later on *Governor*. Rigger in Union Iron Works. Later auto mechanic. Marries U.C. graduate. Two sons. Ten grandsons."

* * *

Rough times on the barkentine *Aurora*: Port Townsend to Hilo, 1920.

A casual visitor from Brookings, Oregon, matched some of the tales on the shelves of the museum library as he spoke into the tape recorder in that room on November 3. The narrator was a senior at a Seattle high school when the opportunity to make a sailing ship voyage arose. A classmate had a sister who was secretary to the Charles Nelson Co., lumber mill and ship owners. The two boys were signed on as Able Seamen, which caused a certain amount of resentment among the shellbacks on board. The year was 1920, the captain of the *Aurora* the well-known Marcus Asmussen.

"Three-finger Frenchy," we called him, he was our donkey-man. He had a little cabin of his own—a little triangular affair—up in the forepeak. Just about room for a bunk, but it was his own.

"This was after we got into Hilo bay. We got into an argument. We hadn't started to discharge yet, as I recall the lumber deckload was still aboard. We got into an argument down in the fo'c's'le—he called me a 'scab.' Well, my Dad was an old

railroad man and to me as a kid, scab was a dirty word. So I came right back at him with some other language that wasn't printable. 'Frenchy' jumped forward and grabbed a dirk that he had there in his cabin and came back at me with the dirk.

"We had a bunch of bananas hanging there in the fo'c's'le—I reached up and stripped off a banana. I don't know to this day why I just didn't just—wilt—when I saw him coming at me, but I reached up and took off a banana and I peeled it and started eating it and he came up and got his face just a few inches in front of mine and his hands clinched on that dirk and said he'd kill me—kill me—if I didn't take back what I said about him.

"I said, 'You called me a "scab" and that's just as bad as what I called you. So we're even.'

"One of the other crewmen came along and grabbed his arm and held him and I got out of the fo'c's'le. It was reported to the captain and the captain had him taken ashore and put in jail. He didn't come back on the ship."

* * *

"The crew aboard were all old time sailormen—not one of them had ever served in steam. They all sailed before the mast all their lives. Captain Asmussen and 'Paddy,' he was an Irishman, he was in my watch, and 'Black Pete,' who was in the port watch—had all been to sea for 37 years at that time. That was 1920.

"They were a very colorful lot—particularly to a couple of kids just out of high school. We had a fellow we called "limey"—of course, he was an Englishman, he was rather heavy-set; he and Frenchy got into a knock-down, drag-out fight on the ship, also while we were in Hilo.

"While we were at sea, I avoided a lot of trouble with the crew because of a certain happenstance—we sprang a leak in a storm right after we got outside. The men were doing a lot of pumping by hand—almost constantly at it—trying to keep water out of her. They couldn't get the little single cylinder Seattle Standard engine that ran a pump down below started. I asked the captain if I could have a try at it because this was my specialty when I was in high school—I had gotten very high marks in automotive courses. So I went down and it was one of the old engines where you could get the rotor turned around 180 degrees; you could put it on one of two ways. I checked the timing and found the rotor was turned 180 degrees, so I turned it back. We got the engine started—from then on my main job for the rest of the trip was keeping that engine running. I did have to stand my night watches and wheel watches, but I was excused from a lot

of chipping and painting. The engine was on a platform down in the pump well. They were very happy that I could keep that pump going; it made me a big man aboard."

* * *

"We had a kid on the *Aurora*—I would judge about sixteen years old; he was a couple of years younger than I was. I can't recall his name. Just a youngster. He didn't know who his mother or father was—he was brought up on the docks. This kid was the donkeyman's helper, he fired the boiler for him and things like that. He was in my watch at sea.

"I can't recall who it was—it was one of the other sailors—this boy got into a fight using lumber hooks—going at one another with lumber hooks. Again we were in Hilo bay. The mate settled that pretty fast—he knocked the one fellow down, I know.

"This kid came to me that night and offered me all the money he could draw from the skipper—he said he would take this fellow out and get him drunk and bring him back and stow him in his bunk—if I would kill this sailor for him . . . I was supposed to finish him off.

"They have a drink down there they call *okolehao*, which is a rice whiskey—it's distilled rice. This kid—it wasn't strong enough or good enough for him; he used to take chewing tobacco and he'd shave the chewing tobacco and put in the bottle with the *okolehao* and shake it all up and then he would drink the *okolehao*. He was quite a character."

* * *

"Captain Asmussen seemed to me—again I am looking at it from a kid's standpoint—like a fatherly type. He had his wife with him and I guess she kept him pretty well under control.

"He was a little bit on the heavy side, to my best recollection of him. He would be a man that would weigh 180–190 pounds. He wasn't very tall as I recall, maybe five foot eight or nine. At sea, he wore pants and an open shirt—more shore fashion than sailor fashion, really.

"I never heard Captain Asmussen really get rough with anybody—the mate used to. A fellow by the name of Peterson, a big man, a great big man; that man must have weighed close to 300. Probably a Swede. I don't remember which Peterson he was. I know they all had nicknames. He had a nickname but I don't remember what it was.

"The second mate, on the other hand, was a fairly young fellow, I would say in his twenties. A nice young fellow—studied a lot to get his papers, but the first mate was one of the real old-timers."

* * *

Our narrator, who subsequently became a federal aviation official, paid off in Hilo because he and his friend had a chance to ship on the steam schooner *San Jacinto*. There were a couple of berths open. They went to Honolulu, a rough passage, and there started to load bailed tin—tin scrap—for the American Can Co. Here he hurt his back "so they put me in the Marine Hospital and the *San Jacinto* sailed without me."

"Later on I was on the beach in Honolulu after I got out of hospital and I heard about this schooner that was going to make a trading trip to the South Seas. So I went down to see what my chances would be to get on her. The first man I ran into when I got on that schooner was "Three-finger Frenchy." So I changed my mind and decided I didn't want to sail in that ship. I don't think I would have come back alive." — K.K.



Aurora, which figures in this interview.

Books for Barter

Some time ago a student came to our library seeking material for a college research paper on a most intriguing aspect of California Maritime history. We asked that he prepare a synopsis for publication in the *Sea Letter*. The entire research paper is on file in our library where any interested member can read it. The synopsis follows:

American Book Smuggling In Mexican California
by William F. Strobridge

Church censorship continued in California even after Mexican independence. California settlers, Mexican and foreign, sought and imported prohibited books. Such trade was illegal but was greatly aided by American ships eager for California trade and glad to avoid Mexican duties.

Book smuggling in Mexican California was first reported around 1830. The American bark *Volunteer* delivered prohibited books to a member of Southern California's Carrillo family. Local authorities had the books burned.

In 1831 the ship *Leonor* arrived in San Francisco where an informant told officials that there were contraband books aboard. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, commandant of the Presidio, went out to the ship after dark and offered to buy the books anyway. The bid was accepted and the volumes were ashore and in his quarters before daylight.

The American brig *Avon* was in California waters in 1834 and got two boxes of books ashore with the cargo to Nathan Spear.

Thomas Larkin was suddenly in the book business in the summer of 1841, selling books and even three Bibles. The identity of the ship bringing Larkin's books to Monterey was not shown in account books but suspicion points to the *California*.

For the Americans contraband books were barter items in smuggling, and for the Californians they were a source of education and ideas.

Fort Ross Field Trip

In 1812 the Russians established an outpost at Ross, a small cove some 60 miles north of San Francisco bay, from which to conduct their extensive fur-seal and otter hunting operations, to develop commercial trade with the Alta Californians, and to raise foodstuffs for the colony at Fort Ross and the larger one at Sitka, Alaska. None of these ventures reached expectations, and in 1840 the Russians offered the property for sale for \$30,000.

Because of the uncertainty of legal title to the land, the best offer was only \$9,000, made by General Vallejo for the livestock alone (after all, he could quite possibly obtain the improvements at no cost after the Russians departed). In late 1841 it was bought for the \$30,000 asking price by John Sutter who immediately employed John Bidwell, a young overland immigrant of that year (and who later founded the town of Chico), to transport the livestock and moveable equipment to Sutter's headquarters at New Helvetia (Sacramento).

In 1845 title to the land at Fort Ross was granted to Manuel Torres by the Mexican Governor. The property then passed through a number of hands until in the late 70s, when it was purchased by the firm of Dixon and Fairfax who built a wooden apron chute on the north bluff of the cove to load the ranch and timber products of the area on schooners for shipment to San Francisco. In 1873 the ranch, including the Fort, was purchased from Dixon and Fairfax by George W. Call who continued the shipping and ranch operations until the 1920s, when the combination of improved highways and dependable trucks made shipping by water uneconomic.

Today the restored Fort is part of the State Department of Parks and Recreation and the remainder of the ranch is used primarily for grazing sheep.

Carlos Call, son of George W. Call, was born at the Fort Ross ranch in 1880 and lived there continuously until his retirement last year. In mid-March Museum Director Karl Kortum and Curator Harlan Soeten visited Mr. Call at the ranch, tape recording his recollections of his long life on the remote Sonoma coast. Of particular interest was the shipping activities of the ranch where, for half a century, tanbark (bark of the tan oak used for curing leather), fence posts, firewood, railroad ties

and some agriculture products were loaded onto schooners lying in the cove below under the "highwire" loading chute.

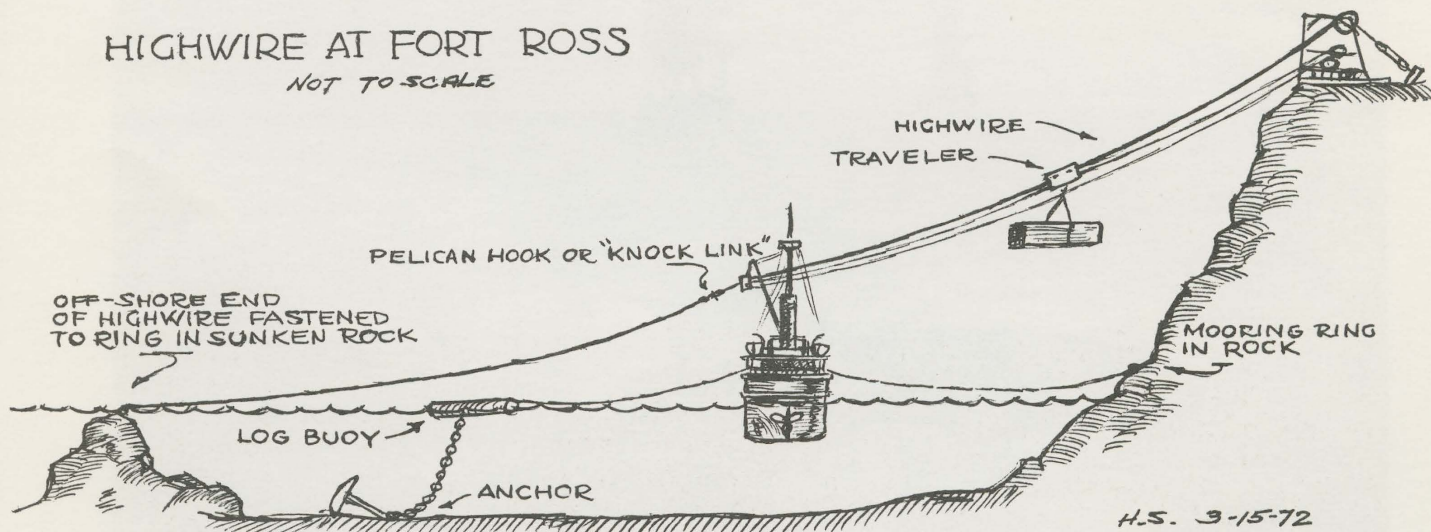
Fort Ross cove affords good protection from the usual northwest winds of summer but is open to the heavy southerly gales of winter, consequently most of the shipping took place during the summer months. Even in the most favorable weather it took an expert seaman to bring a schooner into the cove, moor bow-out to buoys, rig the highwire over the deck, take aboard the consignment of lumber and then let go the moorings and clear the cove for San Francisco. All without power except the wind and tides. Of course some didn't make it and were driven ashore and wrecked. In 1901, during the worst storm in Mr. Call's memory, the two-mast schooner *J. Eppinger* tried to ride out a storm at her moorings but her lines parted, she drifted ashore and was soon broken up by the pounding seas. Other vessels did ride out the storms at their moorings but on at least one occasion a crew spent the night in the rigging as the seas broke over the deck of their vessel and Mr. Call's mother kept a light burning in an upper window of the ranch house to let them know someone ashore was keeping watch.

On a foggy Sunday in 1901 the coastwise passenger steamer *Pomona* was lost by grounding on the reef at Fort Ross and many of the 88 passengers spent the night in the Call ranch house. The following morning some of the survivors started walking over the mountains to Cazadero, the railhead, and later in the day the steamer *City of Topeka* laid offshore and sent her lifeboats in to take off the rest of the survivors. According to Mr. Call "not a person got their feet wet" in the whole episode.

We are fortunate that many reminders of these early days were still at the ranch and that Mr. Call was anxious that they be placed in care of the Maritime Museum. We now have a 14 foot rowboat, built by George Kneass of San Francisco in 1900, used to run the lines for vessels mooring under the wire; a two-wheeled iron traveler that, suspended from the highwire, carried cargo from the loading platform on the cliff down to the schooner below; two different kinds of cargo hooks designed to permit remote tripping thus lowering the cargo to the vessel's deck; a pelican hook or, in Mr. Call's words, a "knock-link" which connected the two ends of the highwire over the vessel's deck; a pilothouse window from the *Pomona* and a number of other artifacts from this but recent bygone era. — H.S.

HIGHWIRE AT FORT ROSS

NOT TO SCALE

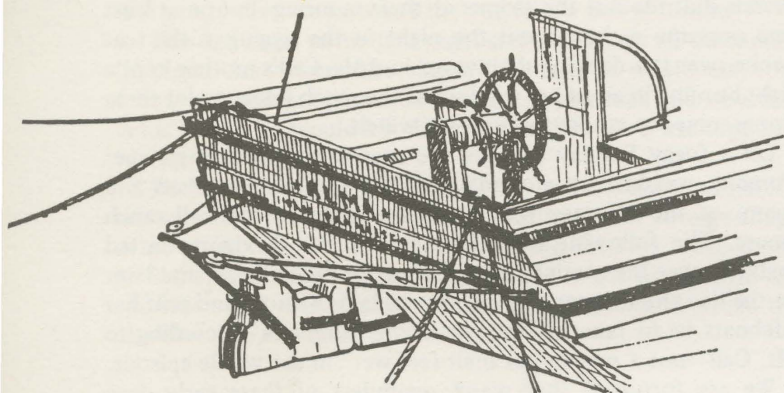


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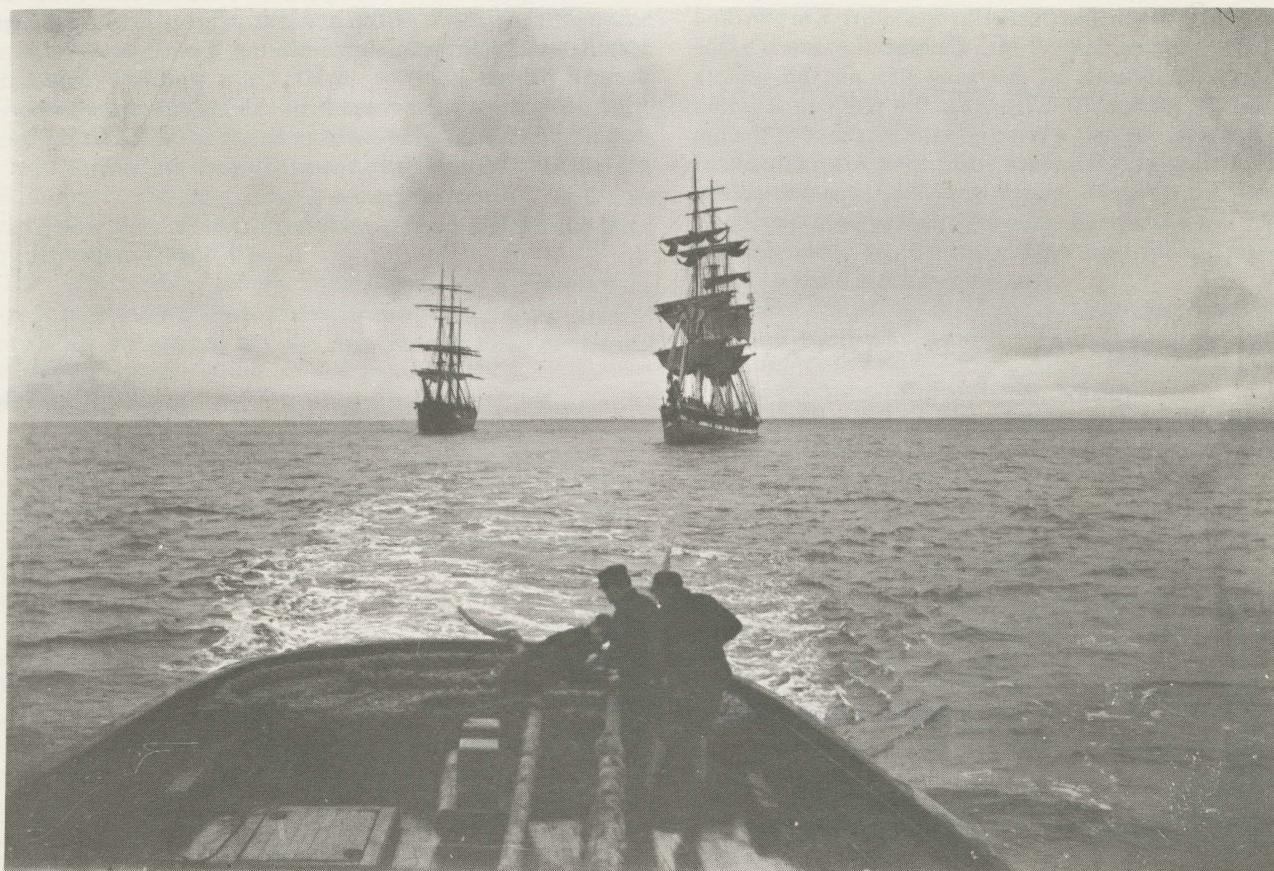
Sea Letter Notes:

Mark Myers is again in England, drawing and painting the small craft along the English coast. We are happy to discover that Mark has broken into the prestigious British Quarterly "Mariners Mirror" with 26 drawings and a byline. The drawings illustrate an article on the "History of the Steering Wheel" by John H. Harland in the issue for February 1972. — A.H.

Mark Myers' drawing of scow schooner *Alma's* wheel and rudder mechanism. *Mariners Mirror*, February 1972.



The Bark *J. D. Peters* and Ship *Pengwern*. From our recently catalogued Morrison Collection.



Our growing library has outgrown its present quarters. To remedy this situation we have installed steel shelving in our basement for periodicals, books on shipbuilding, marine architecture and marine engineering. The arrangement is not ideal, but does relieve the pressure. Readers who want to see books or periodicals in the above categories must arrange by phone the day prior to their visit. — A.H.

A display of working steam marine engines currently occupies the model makers case on the second floor of the Museum. The tiny engines of all types are attracting much attention and sending many visitors to Spreckles Lake in Golden Gate Park, where the San Francisco Model Boat Club sails vessels equipped with similar engines each Sunday from 10 am to 1 pm. — A.H.

With the addition of a new staff member in the Photograph Section, the cataloguing of the Morrison Collection of 400 glass negatives has been accomplished. This enormously valuable acquisition showing sailing vessels under sail prior to 1906 can now be in daily use. — M.D.

Sea Letter is published quarterly by the San Francisco Maritime Museum.

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